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Australia: The Land That Changed My Life

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Australia has turned out to mean more to me than I could ever have imagined. Two years ago, the the Universitat de Barcelona offered me the opportunity to study the last semester of my undergraduate degree in English Literature and Language as an exchange student at Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW. It was a dream come true beyond my wildest dreams and I was determined to make the most out of it. Back then, though I had never been to Australia, my wish was to extend my stay Down Under a year or two after completing my undergraduate studies. Firstly, because I felt that I needed more than six months to become truly fluent in English. Secondly, because I had nothing that tied me back in Barcelona and I was thirsty for some adventure. Today, one and a half years after I first stepped on Australian soil, I'm still here, happily married to an Australian citizen, and this marvellous continent with its friendly people never stops amazing me.

Before continuing, I would like to point out that I limit this paper only to my own experiences. Australia is a multicultural country and even though efforts are made to give equal opportunities to everybody, I feel that my European passport and my white complexion have opened doors to me here. Consequently, it's good to keep in mind that my experiences in Australia might be more positive than those of other people with different backgrounds.

I would like to start by expressing my fascination for Australia. The best way I can think of describing Australia is by saying that it is a human-friendly place. Even though nature on this continent can be very hostile, its people have

built a friendly society in which to live. My experience here is mainly based on my time in Melbourne, where I have lived for a year. I am also grateful that I got a chance to spend a semester in Lismore, which provided me with a good introduction to the Australian way of life from a small-town perspective.

Australia can be seen as a human-friendly place in many ways. To start with, the infrastructure of cities and towns seems to be planned to make living easy and pleasant for everybody. This, I believe, contributes vitally to the quality of day-to-day life in urban areas and to people's well-being in general. Let me give you some examples of small details that in my opinion make a big difference. For instance, when I first arrived in Brisbane, I was amazed to see that river cruises actually are part of their public transport system. What a big difference it must be to catch a ferry to work every day instead of being stuck in a traffic jam somewhere! And then, when I moved to Melbourne, I was surprised when I frequently saw groups of people having barbeques in parks and I was told that the gas barbeques located in almost every park are public. Anybody who wishes to use them can do so for free. To me it seemed just too good to be true! Also, apart from the ferries and the barbeques, the all-pervading feeling of space is something I would like to mention. Predictably you can sense the almost unlimited space when driving through the Australian countryside and gazing at the horizon, but there is plenty of space even in cities. The generally low buildings, which welcome light into the streets, contribute importantly to the feeling of space. Additionally, pedestrians and cyclists have been taken into consideration when planning the cities (particularly Melbourne) and it is quite easy to move about; the streets are predominantly wide and bordered with cycle lanes and footpaths. There are also plenty of parks and other outdoor public areas where people can do sports and socialize without having to feel jam-packed in a big city.

Another human friendly aspect of Australia is, of course, its people. It is not uncommon for a stranger to smile at you in the streets or say "hi!" in a

friendly manner. Individuals talk to each other, even to strangers, in a very informal way, which I find warm and welcoming. In my opinion, people look generally happy and satisfied with their lives. I think the fact that people are content with their respective personal lives contributes to low criminality, especially in bigger cities. I appreciate the fact that one does not have to be afraid of being attacked when walking alone in the streets. Of course, crime occasionally happens, as in any place, but as long as one has some common sense and behaves with caution, there is no reason to be worried.

I could endlessly continue my list of things that make Australia a human-friendly place, but I will now move on to describe my experience here. I will first talk about my time in Lismore, when I first arrived in Australia, and then of my life here in Melbourne and of some trips that I have made.

When I first arrived Down Under I was not sure what to expect. I had heard plenty of good things about Australia, but people's opinions are always subjective, and I was excited to see if this 'new' continent would please me as much as it seemed to please most people. I was very happy about the opportunity to get to see Australia as a student instead of getting only a tourist's point of view. I must admit that when the bus dropped me off in Lismore for the first time, and I realised I had arrived at the town where I was to live for the next four months, I was slightly worried. Lismore seemed smaller than I had expected and not a place where too many exciting things happen. To be honest, I don't think I would have stayed there too long had I been a tourist, but luckily I did not have a choice at the time and I stayed to discover what a curious little town Lismore is.

I had a good time in Lismore. With time I got to meet some lovely people and to experience a small-town way of life. At university I chose to do three units that helped me gain a deeper understanding of Australia and Australians.

The first unit, *Perspectives on Australia*, initiated me to social and political issues of the country. The course material was very interesting even though the group, mainly exchange students in their late teens, was highly unmotivated. What I liked most about the unit were the community activities that we, the students, were invited to get involved with. Thanks to the unit I got to plant native trees with a local landcare group, participate as a volunteer in a festival, do a fieldtrip to an environmentalist commune, visit a coffee plantation, etc. Even now, after completing my degree and moving to Melbourne, I still think that *Perspectives on Australia* was an excellent springboard for me to understand the Australian culture better.

The second unit I chose to do, *Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing*, gave me an introduction into Indigenous ways of seeing the world and taught me quite a lot about myself. The course was given by an Aboriginal professor and much of the material used in class was based on the Aboriginal worldview. The main goal of the unit was to make students look inside themselves and to reflect on their beliefs about life. A strong focus was also laid on listening to peers and learning to appreciate and tolerate other points of view. Time in class was mainly spent on group discussions. It was interesting to see how the bond within the group grew stronger and stronger every week that passed; people opening up and speaking about their beliefs, and being able to do so myself without feeling judged. I truly think that if everybody had a chance to do such a course relatively early in life, there would be more peace and understanding between people in the world. I found *Cultural and Spiritual Wellbeing* a very useful course. It helped me to stop and think about life - about what is important to me. It also prepared me for "real life" in my last semester at university.

The third and last unit I did at Southern Cross University in Lismore was *Outdoor Education*. I really liked this unit as it offered me the possibility to go and explore the Australian bush with somebody who knew what he was doing.

At the time I would not have dared to go bushwalking by myself, since I had heard too many scary stories about Australia's dangerous animals. The absolute highlights of the unit were two 3-4 night fieldtrips to national parks in the area. On these trips I camped for the first time in the Australian bush; saw my first wild kangaroos, possums and poisonous snakes; and was physically and emotionally challenged by the fieldtrip activities. Thanks to *Outdoor Education* I gained knowledge, confidence and eagerness to do bushwalking in Australia without a guide and have since visited many national parks where the beauty of nature just takes my breath away. Moreover, after experiencing Australia's nature, my awareness of its crucial importance to life on earth has grown and I have thus recently joined *The Wilderness Society*: an environmentalist group that protects and restores Australia's forests and bushland. It has been inspiring to see so many people volunteering in a common effort to save old-growth forests, water catchments, etc. in order to reduce climate change and build a better future for all of us.

My experience in Lismore naturally involved much more than just the units I did at university. I lived at the college, which was convenient as it was easy to make friends. I had promised myself to try to make friends with the locals, but as it turned out most of my friends were other exchange students, together with whom I discovered Lismore during our four months there. As I mentioned before, Lismore is a small town but, surprisingly (for me), you can find there practically all that you need: shops, banks, a couple of pubs, some eateries, a swimming pool, a library and even cinemas. Furthermore, there is more to Lismore than one can see at first glance. Although a small town, many cultural activities take place there: talks, exhibitions, plays, concerts, the Lismore Cup, etc. I guess living in Lismore taught me that even in a small place you only get bored if you are boring. There are always things to do if you just show a little interest.

I would now like to talk about one of my discoveries in Lismore: the church. Just to give you an overview, I grew up in Finland in a non-churchgoing protestant family and even though I believe in God, my opinion was that the Christian church was a dying institution. None of my friends in Finland, nor the ones I had made in Spain during the seven years I lived there, go to church more than maybe at Christmas or Easter as a family tradition. In this context, I assumed that it is mostly elderly people who go to church and, that in time, the church would completely lose its importance. However, in Lismore I realised that I was wrong.

One day when walking to the town centre, a German friend of mine and I were offered a lift by one of our neighbours at the college. We were surprised to hear that he was on his way to play in the rock band in one of the local Pentecostal churches. He invited us to go with him, and so we did. I had never heard the term Pentecostal before, but I soon saw how this Christian church differed from the one I had experienced in Europe. I was amazed when I saw the amount of young people who attended the service, the pastor in casual clothing, the informal way the service was given, the band playing catchy tunes and the cheerfulness of the congregation. All except the message of the service was totally different from what I had ever seen in a church before. For the six weeks we had left in Lismore, we joined our neighbour when he went to Sunday service and during these weeks we met some lovely people and learnt more about our religion. When talking to people about this experience, I learnt that Pentecostal churches are fairly popular among Australian youth. I also found that people spoke more openly about religion in Lismore than what I had experienced in Europe. Looking back, I feel that my time in Lismore was in a way a time for soul-searching. The fact that I was in a foreign country, outside my comfort zone, helped me to see things afresh. I feel that both the units I took at university and my experience with the church worked as guides for me. I

now no longer go to church, but I'm happy about the opportunities and the support I was given in Lismore and I cherish the experiences I had there.

During my time in Lismore I investigated different ways of staying in Australia after my student visa expired. When school was down, I worked for a couple of weeks picking blueberries on a farm close to Byron Bay and saved up for a plane ticket to beautiful New Zealand. When I arrived there, I applied online for a Working Holiday Visa to Australia, which I was granted. I was thrilled. This meant that I could spend one year in Australia with a limited working visa: I was only allowed to work three months for the same employer. This limitation did not bother me as my plan was to travel around Australia and do some fruit picking along the way to pay for my travels. However, my plans changed.

I first flew into Melbourne, where I enjoyed the city with the freedom of new graduate that has no immediate responsibilities. When I was preparing myself to continue my travels to northern Victoria, I met K.S., the love of my life, and I decided to stay in Melbourne and look for work here. Now the work limitation turned out to be a bit of a nuisance. Predictably, it is hard to get a decent job if you can only commit yourself for three months. So, as I was running out of my savings, I did the worst job I've ever done: door-to-door selling of electricity contracts! I lasted for two weeks during which I got well acquainted with Melbourne suburbia and realised that my future profession does not lie in sales.

After being a 'saleswoman' I moved on to another job in Melbourne city, which was also mainly occupied by working holiday visa holders. This time it was an administrative position, but it was advertised as a "night owl" job: working hours 10pm to 6am! The late working hours were due to the time difference with Europe, since our customers were over there. As the pay was good and my colleagues were nice, I decided to stick with the job. Moreover, the law regarding the work limitation changed during my time in this position

and I was allowed to continue there after my three months were completed. Doing nightshift was not as rough as I had expected, but if I can avoid it in the future, I will, for sure.

The longer I live in Melbourne the more I like it. It is easy to feel at home here. Melbourne is the most multicultural city in Australia and there are people from all corners of the world living here, which makes it easy for anyone to feel part of the crowd and welcome. Unfortunately, some racism still prevails, but considering the mix of people living in the city, I think the current situation in Melbourne is quite good.

Through K.S., whom I recently married, I have got a deeper multicultural view on Australia. His background is Chinese-Malaysian, and even though he has lived most of his life in Australia, he still appreciates and understands both cultures, which I found fascinating. I believe it is the multicultural population that makes Melbourne such an attractive and dynamic city: people from all over the world contribute with something from their own culture while adopting the local lifestyle. I find this can best be exemplified by the “sizzling” restaurant scene in Melbourne. You can practically find any kind of food that you can think of in Melbourne: Spanish, Vietnamese, Algerian, Colombian, Russian etc. At the grocery stores you can also find a big variety of specialities from different countries, which makes the food preparation easier for those who like cooking.

Another great aspect related to multiculturalism that I would like to point out is the public TV-channel SBS, that daily shows news from many different countries in the original languages. Firstly, I think this is good because it allows immigrants to keep in touch with the culture they have left behind. Secondly, it helps Australians to be more aware of other countries and their points of view regarding world news. And last but not least, it is a good tool for people who are studying a foreign language to practice. Personally I am

grateful for the daily TVE news from Spain, especially when I'm feeling a bit homesick.

Settling down in a new country always takes some effort. The things you take for granted back home suddenly are missing and you have to build up your life again: home, friends, work, hobbies etc. Generally I find this exciting, though challenging. What I find most difficult is finding true friends. With some effort you find friends with whom to go out and have fun, but it takes time, a lot of time, to make friends who are there with you no matter what. In today's world we are lucky that we have modern technologies: when homesickness strikes we can call or write an email to somebody on the other side of the world who we know truly understands us, get something off our chest and life goes on again.

I said before that I would talk about some trips that I have made in Australia. Even though I have spent here some time already, I have only seen a little part of this huge continent. My favorite trip so far has been a road trip from Uluru/Ayers Rock to Darwin. I found driving, especially in a 4WD, in the semi-arid desert very exotic and exciting. Seeing my first wild crocodiles in Kakadu National Park (NT) was definitely another highlight, as well as spotting huge turtles just outside Fraser Island in Queensland and seeing a platypus in its natural habitat on Kangaroo Island (SA). And, as I said before, overall I find the impressive nature in national parks around Australia truly awesome. Hopefully, with time I will get the chance to explore as much as possible of this beautiful country.

When I think about Australia and the things I have experienced here, more and more images and "Magic Milo Moments" pop into my mind. There are so many different aspects of this enormous country that one could write about, but this time I will stop here. As closing words, I would like to thank everybody who made the exchange between Southern Cross University and the

University of Barcelona possible. I do not have enough words to thank you for opening me the doors to this lovely country that changed my life forever.